

MIA's new album *Matangi*

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British-Sri Lankan musician MIA (Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam) released her fourth full-length album *Matangi* this November. A refugee of the Sri Lankan civil war (her father was a prominent Tamil activist and the future singer fled with her family to London in 1986 at age 11), MIA makes pop music that shows an awareness of and sensitivity to the lives of impoverished victims of imperialism around the world.

This alone would make her stand out in a pop music landscape that all too often can’t conceive of a reality outside the club or the bedroom. Not that MIA doesn’t go there as well, but the fact that audiences in the West, especially in the US, have responded to her indicates a healthy interest in the world that she comes from and claims to represent. To what extent has the artist been able to go beyond the immediacy of her experiences and give artistic expression to important truths?

The fifteen tracks on *Matangi* are, first of all, party music. Rather adventurously combining—or surfing between—various hip hop and electronic styles, as well as reggae, Tamil drumming and many other styles and elements from around the world, the songs, often quite dramatically, switch things up musically, sometimes numerous times per song. Basically, anything with a pulsing rhythm and exciting tenor is fair game.

A charismatic performer, if not a great singer, MIA’s vocal performances also cover a great deal of stylistic ground. She raps, croons and hollers in a variety of moods. One has no doubt that Arulpragasam is in creative control, but much credit is also due to producer-composer David “Switch” Taylor, who helms most of the album. Although lacking patience and subtlety, and relying too much overall on the recently trending “trap” hip hop style, at its best, *Matangi* deftly combines fun musical ideas from around the globe in a way that emphasizes how much they, and implicitly the people who get down to these sounds individually, have in common.

Along these lines, it should at least be noted in passing that the prominence of a female singer raised in Sri Lanka as a recording artist (something inconceivable until very recently) speaks to the remarkable global integration of popular culture, and the way in which an endless number of forms and influences work on one another at present and break down previously existing barriers, a thoroughly healthy development.

The most frustrating moments on *Matangi* find MIA adopting the stance of a typical (i.e., cartoonish, tedious) gangster rapper, with a large ego, posturing as a hardened, anti-social outlaw, motivated by money and luxury, romanticizing her particular experience with poverty and oppression and wearing it as an identity rather than using it as a starting point for a serious artistic examination. On the song “Y.A.L.A.,” for instance, delivered with unimpeachable cool, we hear: “I drink some Cointreau [a French liquor]/Keep it in my poncho/Light up like Castro,” and later “Anti war war/M.I.A. underscore/I got the law law/Searching for me on tour/Bankin offshore/Take a trip to Singapore/I need to earn like/I’m [actress] Julianne Moore.”

This is pretty crass stuff, and there’s much more where that came from on *Matangi*. Does Arulpragasam honestly think banking offshore is anti-establishment behavior? Castro is thrown in simply as a “cool” figure with no comment. And nothing in the presentation, unfortunately, indicates she’s lampooning herself, or anyone else.

On the title track, MIA shouts out the names of dozens of countries—Somalia, Bosnia, Cuba, Colombia, etc.—and ends with “It’s so simple, get to the floor!,” seemingly imploring these populations to get out into the streets. Later in the same song: “If you wanna be me you need a manifesto/If you ain’t got one you better get one presto.” What ideas would find their way into Maya Arulpragasam’s manifesto?

Although the singer has drawn the attention of censors in the US (for the line “Like the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] I don’t surrender” in the 2003 single “Sunshowers”), and is generally presented in the media as a political artist with something important to say, Arulpragasam in truth seems confused and, to be frank, rather timid. In a recent interview, the artist placed a “question mark” over her political views. She has criticized George W. Bush in song, but has never referred to Barack Obama, Syria, Egypt...

Even when there is oppositional sentiment in her music, it tends to take a rather self-centered direction, in keeping with various popular genres at present. For example, she seems genuinely concerned about the growing police state. Her 2010 song “The Message” warned presciently: “Headbone connects to the headphones/Headphones connect to the iPhone/iPhone connected to the Internet/Connected to the Google/Connected to the government.” However, this concern has largely devolved into a personal paranoia, with MIA rapping about herself being followed everywhere (for being a party animal?).

She has also painted herself as a victim of racial and gender discrimination in interviews, and, rather lamely, on *Matangi*’s “Boom Skit,” where she takes on the role of an imaginary American bigot telling “brown girl” MIA that “You know America don’t wanna hear your sound,” to turn down her “boom boom jungle music” and “go back to India.” In fact, she attracted a large European and US audience from the beginning. Her first album, 2005’s *Arular* was nominated for a Mercury prize in the UK, and *Spin* magazine called her the best artist of that year (and again in 2008 for her second album, *Kala*). Critics and audiences at least seem above such pettiness.

The new album’s strongest moments are those that take us farthest from such self-centered and self-pitying subject matter. “aTENTion,” a silly rhyming song about tents, is good fun, probably the most inviting song on the album. Presumably this one goes out to the tent-dwellers, of whom there are an ever increasing number.

The single “Come Walk with Me” is a tale of attraction and forgiveness in the Internet age, which begins: “There’s a thousand ways to meet you now/There’s a thousand ways to track you down/Whatever you said and done/There’s a thousand

ways to make it count.” The song is a sweet and straightforward expression of sentiment until a couple of minutes in when, as though everyone has grown slightly embarrassed, it mutates into 4-on-the-floor dance beat and becomes a sugary self-parody. The sound of an Apple device turning up the volume that ushers in the transition is a clever touch, but the fact that the sentiment is aborted in this way may point to a deeper sourness.

In what must be the most significant political act of her career so far, the kick-off concert for the *Matangi* tour in New York City was opened by a live address from Julian Assange, via video conference. Assange, the WikiLeaks leader who is still marooned in the Ecuadorian embassy in London under dire threat from the UK and US governments, was projected onto a large screen and addressed MIA’s audience for ten minutes. Assange championed Edward Snowden, warned of the dangers of NSA spying and implored the singer’s fans to become politically aware and active to change the world for the better.



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